

SÃO FRANCISCO RIVER

The Sao Francisco River rises in the mountains of the state of Minas Geraes, and flows northeastward for about 1500 miles, then turns almost due eastward, and breaking through the mountain wall in the magnificent Paulo Afonso Falls, finally flows into the Atlantic near Penedo. For about a hundred miles it forms the boundary line between the states of Pernambuco and Bahia. It has been called the only truly Brazilian river, for the Amazon has many of its sources outside Brazil, while the Paraná, in the South, ceases to be Brazilian, flowing into the Rio de la Plata.

In October, 1943, I had to make a business trip to Rio de Janeiro. That was during the war, of course, and transportation was difficult. Through some influential friends I managed to get a plane reservation and a number three priority for the round trip, thus assuring my return. I had arranged my affairs, however, in such a way that I could be absent for a month or six weeks without serious inconvenience, and I had an idea that if I could get definite information about boats on the São Francisco River I might attempt to return by that route, in order to see a part of Brazil somewhat off the beaten track.

Anyone who has ever been to Rio will surely not forget it. It was not my first visit to Rio, but it was my first plane trip, and I found it agreeably exciting. I spent several days seeing the people that I needed to see, and transacting my business, and during these days made inquiries about river transportation. Nobody could give me any certain information. One person who had traveled by that route told me that there was regular boat service, but that when the river was low the service might be suspended for months at a time. But since I had heard that heavy rains, the first of the season, had been falling in Minas, I decided to risk it; and turning in my plane reservation Sunday afternoon, I set out early on Monday morning, November 1, for the unknown.

I knew, of course, that I should get the boat, if at all, at Pirapora, a day's run by train from Belo Horizonte, the capital of the state of Minas, and the northernmost point to have any rail connection with Rio. I resolved to go to Belo Horizonte

by way of Lavras, to visit some friends there, as it was not much out of the way. To go there one takes the São Paulo train as far as Cruzeiro, where he transfers to a railroad of narrower gauge (though by no means the narrowest to be met with in Brazil) which sets out to climb the mountain wall to the plateau of Minas. A glance at the map will show that this plateau is highest at its seaward side, and the waters flow toward the interior, either going west into the Paraná or north into the São Francisco. The mountain wall is quite formidable, and our two wood burning locomotives puffed and labored as our train wound in and out among the spurs of the mountain, while an ever wider view continued to delight and amaze us. At last we went through the long tunnel at the summit, and after we emerged the train stopped for a moment, to disconnect the second locomotive, no longer needed. Right where we were stopped a great stream of water came gushing out of the mountain side, and there were some small boys with tin cans, offering water to the passengers. The water was excellent, and I hoped the can was clean; but one can scarcely travel in the interior of Brazil if he is going to be over squeamish in such matters.

I had to stop for the night in the town of Três Corações, (three hearts) and wait until after noon for a train to Lavras, where I arrived Tuesday afternoon, and stayed until the same time the following afternoon, when I took a train for Belo Horizonte, on which I had my first and only experience with a Brazilian sleeping car. (If you expect a Pullman, you will be sorely disappointed, but it beats sitting up.) On this train I witnessed an amusing incident. A group of young men were on their way to some place to play football. (Soccer football, introduced by the British, has become the national game of Brazil.) Most of the railroads of Brazil use wood burning locomotives, and to have one's clothes set on fire by the sparks that constantly come in at the windows is but a commonplace incident of travel. Whenever anyone smells the smoke of burning cloth, he jumps up quickly, and examines himself all over, to see if he himself is the victim. One of those football players, feeling in a mood to play pranks, secured a bit of coarse twine, and igniting the end of it, kept it concealed in his hands while he strolled slowly through the car, pausing here to converse with someone, there to look over the shoulder of someone reading the paper. One after

another the passengers, as they scented the burning twine, would jump up and brush themselves off carefully, then see the joke that had been played on them, and sit calmly to watch the passengers in front of them become victims of the same joke.

Belo Horizonte is a fine modern city which has had a mushroom like growth. The people fortunately had vision enough to foresee this growth and do a good job of planning, so that the city is beautifully laid out, with wide streets and shade trees. The people of Belo Horizonte have a very high opinion of their city. I saw it at a disadvantage, because it was raining most of the time, but it is unquestionably one of the most progressive places I have seen in Brazil. I remembered that I had a friend of college days who was connected with the Methodist girls' college in the city, called Colégio Isabella Hendrix. I called her up, and was invited to visit the college, and have dinner in the dining hall, which was very agreeable. The college has a splendid location, and fine new buildings.

There was only one train daily for Pirapora, and this was to leave at four o'clock in the morning. I still did not know whether I could get a boat, but in turning in my plane reservation I had burned my bridges behind me, and thus I embarked on the train on Friday morning with as light a heart as one can summon at such an hour. The sixteen hour ride was uneventful. The country is rolling, not mountainous as I had thought it might be. Farther east, where the plateau breaks up, I understand it is quite rugged; but here it was fairly smooth, mostly grassland. It looked like a good cattle country, which indeed it is. It seemed to be sparsely inhabited.

The one break in the day's monotony was the half hour stop for dinner at mid-day, at Curvello. As soon as the train stopped, all the passengers went running for the hotel, distant about 150 yards from the station. Soon every place was taken, and some had to stand. One paid five cruzeiros (about twenty-five cents) and served himself at will from the abundant platters on the table. It was such a dinner as one may sometimes dream about. Times have changed since then, even in Curvello, I daresay; but in the interior meat is relatively cheap, and there was an abundance that overcame me, used as I was to the customs of the Brazilian hinterland. Roast beef and pork, steak, lamb, chicken, rice, macaroni, and of course the inevitable

feijão (beans) and farinha. There must have been thirty or forty guests, and when they had finished the supply of food seemed very little diminished.

On arrival at Pirapora, about eight o'clock, I sought out a hotel, and straitway began to make inquiry about boats. To my relief I was informed that the recent rains had raised the river level to the point that permitted travel, and that that very day the first boat in three months had left for the North. The following morning I was able to book passage on the paddle wheel steamer São Salvador, leaving that very afternoon. The cabins were all taken, but I might sleep on the deck, for which a mattress would be provided. There was no reduction in the fare for that lack of convenience, but the fare was very reasonable, only about twenty dollars for the trip to Joazeiro, which lasted a week. After two or three days I fell heir to a cabin when somebody got off; and in the meantime my difficulty was alleviated somewhat when an elderly gentleman from Ceará, prefeito of the town of Cratheus, lent me a hammock, which I could swing on the deck, and sleep in great comfort. The people in the sertão in general, and especially those in Ceará, use hammocks a great deal, and seldom travel without them. A hammock may be put into a sack and carried along with your baggage, and thus you are assured a clean place to sleep, rather than a bed full of bedbugs, as is so often found in the hotels in the interior. Another advantage is that an almost unlimited number of guests may be accommodated by swinging hammocks in the hall, the living room, or on the porch; then in the daytime these can easily be rolled up and got out of the way.

The weather was perfect for sleeping on deck. For some reason that I have never been able to understand, the rainy season is different in the different parts of Brazil. In Pernambuco it coincides with the (relatively) cool season, from May to August; but in Minas it comes in the hot season, and was just beginning in the end of October; and in the Amazon region it is still different, the river at Manaus being about at its crest in April. I do not know where is the line of division between the rainy season of Pernambuco and that of Minas. It showered a little the day we left Pirapora, but after that not a drop fell on us the rest of the way, and the sun seemed hotter

each day than the day before. There were awnings stretched over the deck, and as long as the boat was moving, creating a breeze, it was pleasant. When stopped, it was like a furnace, with innumerable flies to add to the discomfort.

There is no second class on those boats -- only first and third. The first class is endurable; the whole upper deck is first class, and is kept reasonably clean, and there is room enough for some comfort. There were eight cabins, as well as I remember, each with upper and lower berth, wash basin and mirror, and about six square feet of floor space. The berths had hard, straw mattresses, and no springs. There was one shower and toilet, for both sexes. The water, both for bathing and drinking, was river water, though for the latter purpose it was cooled in porous earthenware bottles or jars, though not boiled. River water in that section, if allowed to stand for twenty-four hours, is generally considered safe for drinking. The third class was all the deck below not occupied by the boiler and engine. There were people, animals and baggage, all in what appeared to be the greatest confusion. There were hammocks swung everywhere there was room to put them, and the people spent the greater part of the time lying in the hammocks, which is not surprising, as there was little room for them elsewhere. There were some there who got out their fishing lines every time the boat stopped, and spent the time fishing, now and then catching a fish.

The passengers in the first class were all of the so called gentleman or white collar class, and there was certainly an interesting variety. Some of them were going to points along the river, but the greater part were going through to Juazeiro, on their way to Recife or points in Pernambuco or Ceará. Besides the mayor of Cratheus already referred to, there was a lawyer, ^{a journalist,} a diamond buyer, a parrot buyer, a practical engineer, a Catholic priest, a young man, graduate of an agricultural college in Minas, on his way to take up a job with the Department of Agriculture in Pernambuco, and myself. This young man is the only one whose name stays with me after these years. His name was José Pires, and we became quite good friends on the trip. There was also a young lieutenant of the Brazilian army. One or two of the passengers had their wives and children with them, and there was an unattached girl who seemed to be a

sort of protegee of the captain, but José Pires, who seemed to have an unerring instinct in such matters, assured me that she was no better than a common prostitute.

I was, of course, the only foreigner on board, and was regarded with not a little suspicion by some of my fellow passengers, many of whom sensed little difference between a German and an American, but felt that any foreigner was to be distrusted in wartime. That feeling was heightened when I produced a kodak, and began taking pictures on the two precious rolls of film that I had managed to get from a friend in Rio, who herself had bought them on the black market. One of my fellow passengers came to me and said, "These folks don't like that kodak business. I wouldn't be surprised if they should take it away from you." I decided that the best plan was to put on a bold front, and I laughed it off, openly, saying, "Nonsense! What harm can it do to the São Francisco River for me to take a picture of it? Or even this boat, far back in the interior?" Then one morning when we stopped for wood, I got out on the bank in plain sight of all, and took a picture of the boat, and as I sprang back on the deck exclaimed laughing, "There! Now I've sabotaged the boat". My bluff seemed to work. And when the newspaperman brought out his (much superior) camera and began taking pictures too, the whole matter subsided, and I heard no more about it. The mayor of Cratheus always addressed me familiarly as Alemão (German), although I had explained that I was an American. Near the end of the voyage he learned in some way that I was the "diretor" of a college, and he came to apologize for his familiarity, saying, "I would not have treated you that way if I had known that you were a doutor". (Anyone holding any sort of academic degree is generally called doutor (doctor) in Brazil, and treated with great respect.)

The passage lasted a week, almost to the hour. That gave us time to get acquainted, swap many experiences, and tell all the jokes we knew. There was a checkerboard, and José Pires and I played checkers a great deal. We were pretty evenly matched. Checkers as played in Brazil is a different game, the king (they call it a queen) once made having the same move as the bishop in chess; and there are other minor differences. I tried to learn Brazilian checkers, and Pires tried to learn North American, with the result that he generally won at his kind, and I at mine. The lieutenant expressed a

liking for chess, whereat I improvised a set of chessmen; but when I beat him two games straight, he lost interest. Much of the time we merely sat on deck and watched the scenery go by -- and there was precious little scenery, no mountains, no cultivated fields, nothing but a line of trees on either side. I had hoped at least to see some alligators, but not a one! The lieutenant claimed to have seen one, and fired at it with his pistol, but noone else saw it.

The meals were served on deck, and followed the typical Brazilian pattern. For breakfast, we had bread and butter and coffee; for lunch we had a meat stew, rice, beans and farinha; for dinner we had no beans, but had a soup, generally made from the remains of the beans. Once or twice we varied the menu with chicken or fish; but Brazilian cooks usually season chicken stew the same as beef stew, and it tastes just the same, except for being full of little sharp bones, because they hack the chicken to pieces with a cleaver instead of cutting in the joints. At lunch and at dinner we had dessert -- always a thin wedge of doce (guava paste or banana paste) and after dinner coffee.

One would think that on such a boat, far in the middle of nowhere, he might wear anything he saw fit; but this was still Brazil, and the amenities must be observed. An incident will illustrate this. The prefeito (generally translated "mayor", but really a more important office, being a sort of county executive, the highest office in the county) of Cratheus one day came to lunch wearing the jacket of his pajamas. This was not so strange as it might appear to a North American, for the Brazilians often use their pajamas for lounging about the house, and during the morning a man at home may often wear the jacket of his pajamas instead of putting on a shirt and collar. According to their customs, he is more "dressed" thus than when wearing a shirt, collar and tie, but no coat. The steward informed the prefeito that according to the captain's orders he could not come to the table without a coat. The prefeito pointed out that some of the men were at table in sport shirts, without coats; but the steward replied that a sport shirt was a different matter; a sport shirt was "correct dress". The prefeito considered himself vastly insulted, and left the table, never deigning to come to the table again during the voyage. At each meal some friend

prepared a plate and took to him in his cabin; after this affront to his dignity he could not come to the table, nor speak to the steward or the captain again. Those of us who did not use sport shirts followed the Brazilian custom scrupulously, and always wore coats, however hot the weather. Happily this custom is beginning to give way in recent years, due to American influence.

The fuel was wood, and there were wood stations along the river banks, like filling stations along a highway. When the captain wanted to stop for wood he would order the whistle blown as the boat neared the woodpile; and by the time the boat was tied up there was someone there to sell the wood, which was neatly stacked up, and sold by the cubic meter. (The metric system is used for almost all measures in Brazil, though one still finds some people using the palmo and braça, corresponding approximately to the English "span" and "fathom" respectively.) One night we ran out of wood, and had to tie up until daylight. Luckily daylight revealed a fallen tree nearby, from which the men soon cut a sufficient supply to take us to the next "filling station". In loading the wood, the "roustabouts" used each a strip of canvas, on which the heavy sticks were laid, the ends being brought together to make a bundle, which was hoisted to the shoulders, carried up the plank, and thrown with a resounding clang on the iron deck below. One of these men was a perfect type of "John Henry", bringing incredible loads, and singing at his work.

I had supposed that in a country where the river was the principal means of transportation the boats would be crowded with all sorts of freight. I was amazed to see how little freight we carried, and how unimportant were the products carried. The most important item of freight seemed to be bottled beer, which, however it may be in Europe the poor man's drink, in Brazil is a luxury for the rich. This will serve to show to what a great extent the life of the people of the interior is still self-sufficient, depending almost exclusively on local production and local industry. The valley is not thickly populated, and most of the people there lead a very primitive sort of life. Many people feel that there is a great future in store for this valley, but there are many problems to be solved, among which two of the most urgently pressing are the control of floods and of malaria.

There are several towns along the river, varying in population from a few hundred to five or six thousand, and we stopped at each one, generally staying several hours, though during much of that time there was no loading or unloading going on, and I could see no reason for staying. Their names are euphonious: Januária, Carinhanha, Bom Jesus da Lapa, Xique-Xique, Barra do Rio Grande, Remanso. I was eager to see Xique-Xique, (the name means a kind of cactus) as I had often looked at it on the map, and had thought of it as perhaps the remotest place I could ever hope to reach. But I was surprised to find a neat little town, with a good wharf, some paved streets, a telegraph station, and a passable motor road connecting it with the capital of the state, São Salvador da Bahia (generally just called Bahia for short), about 500 miles away. Xique-Xique is on a tributary, just a few miles from the main stream, and our boat was the first one to go there in four months, they told me. At Bom Jesus da Lapa there is a remarkable hill, or small mountain, of limestone, rising from the plain otherwise innocent of any sort of hills. All the outside has been eroded by wind and water until it resembles some sort of carving; and in this hill there is a cave, which has been fitted up as a church, hence the name (Good Jesus of the Cave). The entrance is large, and the cave itself is large enough to accommodate two or three hundred people. Besides the entrance there is an aperture where light comes in from outside, making it just light enough to see distinctly without artificial illumination. It is said that miracles of healing have been effected there.

At one of the places that we passed, a small boy brought on board a model steamboat, made of the pith of banana plants, about two feet long, and made with such a precision of detail as I have seldom seen. Every single detail of the boat was reproduced with the greatest fidelity, and just about according to scale. The boy said he had made it himself, and offered it for sale. I finally bought it for fifty cruzeiros (about \$2.50) and my fellow passengers marveled that I had gotten it so cheaply. Some even suggested that it was stolen, which it may have been. It was a rare bargain, but unfortunately, due to the material of which it was made, it was so very light that it required delicate handling; and knowing that after disembarking in Joazeiro I still had 300 miles to travel by truck, I began to foresee the practical impossibility of

getting home with it intact, and to wish I had never bought it. I found a way out, however. There was at that time no regular plane service to Joazeiro, but there was a landing strip, and the newspaper man had arranged for a plane to meet him there. The plane could carry only two passengers, and the second place had long since been preempted by the lieutenant. The lieutenant offered to take the model off my hands at the same price I had paid, and I accepted with regret, but not without relief.

Just a few miles above Joazeiro are some rapids that are considered difficult at low water. We had outrun our high water on the way down, and the river was pretty low here, so that the captain appeared to feel considerable apprehension on attempting the rapids, but we came through without mishap, and tied up in Joazeiro just before dark on Saturday afternoon. There are really two cities, Joazeiro on the south bank (as the river has already about completed its big curve), in the state of Bahia, and Petrolina on the north bank, in Pernambuco. Each has a population of ten or fifteen thousand, I should guess, Joazeiro probably having a slight advantage. Joazeiro is connected with the capital of the state by rail, and from Petrolina the railroad extends across the corner of Pernambuco and into the State of Piauh; but there is no bridge, or was not at that time. It is easy to imagine that if these two towns were connected by a good highway and railroad bridge they might grow into a large center as the valley develops more. The first step in this development would seem to be a dam at the site of the rapids just mentioned, to improve navigation, furnish water for irrigation, and supply hydroelectric power.

The want of a bridge is supplied by a large number of ferry boats, which ply constantly back and forth. I was interested to note that in the constant southeast trade wind, which blows the year round with little variation, they could use their sails to cross, either north or south, with equal facility, by simply changing the angle of the sail. Some of us stayed in Joazeiro, but the greater part, being bound for points in Pernambuco or Ceará, crossed over to Petrolina, and sought a hotel. The one considered the best was full up; and the one we got may not have been the worst, but I will wager a good deal that it holds the record for bedbugs.

We were fortunate in securing transportation. Just about noon the following day

a truck left for Crato, Ceará, and we saw our companions ride away, perched on top of the load, with no protection from that terrible sun. Shortly after dinner José Pires called me aside and told me that he had just arranged for us to get the only two places still open on an army truck to leave about three o'clock for Rio Branco, (the end of the railroad from Recife) for supplies, the trip being made especially at this time in order to accommodate the mother superior of a convent. She rode in the cab, of course, and the available space in the body of the truck was taken up by an elderly priest and a group of seminary students, with the exception of the two places for Pires and me. There was even a cover, for which we were grateful. The plan was to go as far as Boa Vista that night, and on to Rio Branco the following day. Really, two trucks were going, the second being piled high with empty gasoline drums, which, after being filled, were to compose the greater part of the load for the two trucks on the return trip.

We left about four o'clock, and as we were leaving I felt what I thought was a cold coming on; but it must have been a sort of influenza, for I had a high fever that night and all the following day. I suffered acutely from thirst, the only liquid I succeeded in getting being a cup of wretched coffee about six o'clock. Much of the road was unimproved, and our progress was slow; and then our engine quit on us a little after dark. After hours spent in trying to make it go, the empty drums were unloaded from the other truck, and the passengers transferred to it; (doubtless in attention to the mother superior) and we finally reached Boa Vista about one-thirty in the morning, having had no supper, only to find that the only hotel had not even so much as a slice of bread, or a cracker, to offer us. There was water, which we needed badly; and enough hammocks for all were found somewhere, and strung up all over the place. I fell into one, fully dressed, and slept fitfully till morning, still burning with fever. The next day was like a nightmare. I have vague recollections of passing towns, of which I did not bother to inquire the names. At noon we went to a hotel somewhere, but I could not eat. I fell into a hammock that was conveniently placed, and left it again with the most extreme reluctance. Pires was a faithful friend, who stood by me through all, and I shall forever be grateful for his help.

We arrived at last at Rio Branco about ten o'clock at night, and found a fairly comfortable hotel, and I felt that surely the worst was over. I was then within little more than one hundred miles of home (Garanhuns). My fever had about burned itself out, and the next morning, while very weak, I was able to put on a more cheerful appearance.

There are only three trains a week from Rio Branco to Recife, and this was not the day for a train; but we found a truck, loaded with tanbark (of the angico tree), and we climbed to the top of the load with hearts fairly light. It showered on us a little that morning, but that did not worry me much. The Brazilians have a proverb, Quem vai para casa não se molha, (You don't get wet going home) which has often cheered me. At São Caetano, where the road forks, I bade goodby to José Pires, who was going on to Recife; and I caught another truck (it was easy on this much traveled road) which set me down at my door about nine-thirty that night, November 16 -- and I had done it! The trip from Recife to Rio had taken eight hours, the return trip sixteen days.